

SUBMISSION TO THE BBC TRUST ON THE IMPARTIALITY REVIEW
OF NETWORK NEWS COVERAGE OF THE FOUR UK NATIONS

Background

As part of its ongoing monitoring of impartiality of BBC output, the BBC Trust commissioned a review in 2007 of the BBC's network news and factual coverage of the four nations of the United Kingdom. The subject of the review was chosen following audience feedback in the four nations gathered at public meetings, through audience research and from the four Audience Councils in the nations. The Councils had regularly raised concerns about lack of representation of the nations and regions on network programmes, and insufficient focus on the news from the devolved nations on network news.

The review included extensive research by Cardiff University and the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) and an independent report by Professor Anthony King to which Audience Council England, together with the three other Audience Councils, was invited to contribute by responding to 20 areas of questioning and by noting examples of good and bad practice drawn from television, radio and the BBC's online services. In England, the result was some 29 pages of comment from the 12 Regional Audience Councils in England including more than 45 examples of good and bad practice.

The Trust's report was published on 11 June 2008. The principal conclusions were that there was a need for:

- A greater richness in BBC news and current affairs network content by comparing experiences between the nations and also by sourcing stories and pictures from across the UK
- Accuracy of content and in particular clearer labelling
- Ensuring significant stories were not missed by the network
- Redressing metrocentricity.

BBC Management has since responded fully to the Trust and made a number of commitments to address the weaknesses highlighted in the report.

Submission from Audience Council England

Audience Council England has considered the Trust's conclusions and response by BBC Management.

It welcomes the Trust's statement that the BBC needs to improve the range, clarity and precision of its network news coverage of what is happening in the different UK nations and regions, and endorses the recognition of the impartiality of the BBC's coverage of politics and policy.

However, while the review provides a strong assessment of the shortcomings in the BBC's coverage of devolved matters, the Council believes it is weak on coverage of England and has little if anything to say on how its diverse communities - encompassing ethnic minorities, cultures and new migrant communities - are portrayed and represented on network news.

The Council's concerns fall into three distinct areas:

- the terms of reference and content of the Impartiality Report by Professor King;
- the low visibility of England and of matters of importance to the Audience Council England within the review, most notably the duty to reflect the whole of the UK, taking account of diversity; and
- the need for proportionality in BBC coverage.

Members had been disappointed with the process of the review in that the content of the King report did not meet its repeatedly stated brief 'to consider how the BBC's UK-wide network news, current affairs and factual programming had kept pace with the changing political, social, economic and cultural architecture'. Instead it focused almost wholly on coverage of devolved matters and failed to draw on the many examples of inadequate coverage which the English regional councils had worked hard to provide, as requested. One such example was the coverage of the Shannon Matthews disappearance which had been put forward by the English councils but had been ignored.

Similarly, the review had not seriously addressed Audience Council England's concerns about UK-wide portrayal. While the Trust had commented in passing on audiences' belief that the BBC could reflect their communities and areas better, the Council noted that it had been left to BBC Management to commit to reporting more national English stories from outside London. The Council was pleased to note that this was already visible in output since July 2008.

These concerns about UK-wide portrayal had been compounded by a significant gap in the content of the review and in the responses from both the Trust and BBC Management, in that no direct reference had been made to the UK's diverse communities.

These important omissions led the Council to fear that the balance in reporting from the four nations would become skewed in favour of the devolved nations, inevitably leading to a disproportionately low coverage of the England population and its diverse communities.

The Council believes the issue to be of such importance in working towards social cohesion across the UK, that it is incumbent on all four Audience Councils to embrace fully a sharing of priorities for audiences across the UK in relation to monitoring the BBC's performance against the Public Purposes of *Sustaining citizenship and civil society*, and *Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities*.

In conclusion, in making this submission to the Trust, the Council wishes to emphasise its position, enshrined in the Royal Charter with the other nations' Audience Councils, as independent advisers to the Trust; drawn from diverse communities and free from BBC influence; and defending the interests of audiences in a non-political and non-partisan way to act in support of the National Trustee for England.

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